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ABSTRACT

Secondary students with mild disabilities often are unprepared to make a successful transition into adulthood. The traditional secondary curriculum for mildly disabled students focuses too much on remedial academics and not enough on the specific skills needed in social interactions, daily living, occupational choice, and employment. In addition, students seldom participate in their transition planning conferences in a meaningful way, and receive little direct instruction in skills for self-advocacy. Students with mild disabilities have high dropout rates, reflecting low motivation to remain in school, and seldom pursue postsecondary education or training. In an attempt to demonstrate the relevance of school curriculum to adult living, educators in the Kentucky Transition Project developed the course "Life Management," which focuses on behaviors needed to become a responsible family member, citizen, and employee. Particular emphasis is placed on self-advocacy and problem-solving skills development. Self-advocacy training addresses the ability to assess one's own skills, abilities, and disability-related needs; knowledge of civil rights and federal legislation on disabilities; and communication skills. The course employs teaching strategies that emphasize hands-on activities, small group discussions, and self-discovery projects. Students are instructed in a six-step management and decision-making model for establishing weekly and future goals. Implementation of this curriculum will reduce attrition of students with mild disabilities and equip them for productive lives in their communities. (SV)

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LIFE MANAGEMENT: BRINGING RELEVANCE TO THE CLASSROOM

Secondary students with mild disabilities are unprepared to make a successful transition into adulthood because of the following problems: 1) the failure of the traditional curriculum to meet their needs; 2) a lack of skills for self-advocacy; 3) low motivation to remain in school; and 4) a lack of skills to make a successful transition to post-secondary settings (i.e., maintain employment, enter the military, enter college or enter other training programs). As a result, these students are often unprepared for employment and for living independently in the community.

Research shows that the dropout rate among students with mild disabilities is a major national problem for American education. Secondary students with mild disabilities, when considering all students who receive special education services, are the most at risk of dropping out of school. Fardig, Algozzine, Schwartz, Hensel, and Westling (1985) found that in a sample of rural students with mild disabilities, 69% finished the twelfth grade, a result implying that about 31% of these students dropped out of school. The High School and Beyond studies (Lichtenstein, 1987; Owings & Stocking, 1986), which reported national data, indicated that students who identified themselves as having a specific learning disability dropped out of school at higher rates than students who identified themselves as having other disabilities. Studies that compared special education dropout rates with control group dropout rates or normative data consistently showed that students with mild to moderate disabilities left school more often that students without disabilities (Bernoff, 1981; Bruininks, Thurlow, Lewis, & Larson, 1988; Hess & Lauber, 1985; Levin, Zigmond & Birch, 1985; Owings, & Stocking, 1986, Stephenson, 1985; White, Shumaker, Warner, Alley, & Deshler, 1980; Zigmond & Thornton, 1985). Furthermore, dropout special students demonstrated lower employment rates (Edgar, 1987).

Many different attempts have been made to prevent high-risk students from dropping out and to re-engage students who have already dropped out. Existing dropout interventions, already part of special education programs, include early identification, individualized approaches, smaller size classes, lower pupil-teacher ration, vocational education, employment preparation and job training, and counseling. While each of these may be necessary, they are not preventing students from dropping out of school. 1991-92 statistics show that 32.7% of the 3,180 students with disabilities in Kentucky who exited school dropped out. In many rural districts, the dropout rate among students with disabilities ranges from two to five times higher than the dropout rate among the total population.

The traditional curriculum at the secondary level does not meet the transitional needs of youth with mild disabilities. Traditional academic demands and/or graduation requirements, evidenced across the nation, have been the primary factors driving teachers' instructional content and delivery. According to Halpern (1992), "Curriculum content still tends to focus too much on remedial academics and not enough on functional skills. Instructional design often ignores the issues of maintenance and generalization which we have no reason to believe that the skills being

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taught in the classroom will be used in the community settings where they are relevant." More specifically, coursework often does not prepare students with those specific skills needed in the areas of personal/social interactions, daily living, occupational exploration and guidance, and self-advocacy, which allow for effective and successful transition into adulthood. A traditional curriculum offers very little linkage between the demands in the classroom and the demands placed on youth as functional members of the community.

Students with more severe disabilities often have been the recipients of community-based instruction and other programs designed to develop functional skills and employment training; however, students with mild disabilities have been required to enroll in courses that inadequately prepare them for the type of employment they are likely to pursue, and they have had very limited options for alternative programs. One alternative, vocational schools, typically do not allow admittance until eleventh grade, and even if a student does attend a vocational school, without the assistance of a collaborative teacher/vocational liasion and the implementation of accommodations and adaptations, the student has less chance of experiencing success.

Across the nation students with disabilities generally have a lack of skills for self-advocacy. Despite the inclusion of the transition component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), little direct instruction is provided to students to develop an awareness of federal and state regulations and of self-advocacy skill development. Although in most school settings the IEP conference occurs on an annual basis, Ysseldyke, Algozzine, and Thurlow (1980) have reported than many students with disabilities are not involved at all in this basic special education program planning activity. Fenton, Yoshida and Kauffman (1979) similarly have noted that, if students are involved in IEP conferences, their involvement is passive at best. Even though students may be invited and attend their transition planning conference, few experience meaningful participation. Students interviewed in the Ohio Valley Cooperative region of Kentucky expressed that they did not feel that their transition plan reflected <u>their</u> goals for future career plans or community and recreational living but were rather the product of adult input. Students reported being "nervous" or "scared" because of all the teachers and adults and said they were "too chicken" to ask questions or request clarifications. According to Phillips (1990), academic programs for students with learning disabilities traditionally taught students how to compensate for skill deficits, but this instruction did not sufficiently prepare adolescents to advocate for themselves in an adult world.

Low motivation to remain in school is a widespread problem among students with mild disabilities. Gartner and Lipsky (1989) reported that 47% of adolescents with learning disabilities drop out of school by the age of 16. Low motivation is assuredly a contributing factor in this high statistic. Low motivation may be reflected in poor school attendance, low grades, and/or behavioral problems. Researchers have seen student motivation as a critical component in the effectiveness of academic interventions for adolescents with learning disabilities (Adelman & Taylor, 1983; Ellis, Deshler, Lenz, Schumaker, & Clark, 1991). Although current legislation encourages student involvement in transition planning, involvement is generally inert, and goals and objectives are traditionally teacher-generated. When students are not involved, there is a tendency for a lack of motivation on the students' part to achieve the stated goals and objectives.

Once the student exits high school, the student experiences an abrupt cutoff of the long-term resources and support that specially designed instruction has provided. Follow-up training is usually limited, with counselors not being available indefinitely. Some youth choose not to seek post-school support services. Other training programs such as those provided by the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation are often less readily available to students with mild disabilities than to students with more severe disabilities. Additionally, students with mild disabilities generally do not pursue post-high school opportunities. The National Longitudinal Transition Study showed that only 15% of students in special education proceeded on to any type of postsecondary education following completion of high school (Butler-Nalin, Marker, & Shaver, 1989). The 15% included approximately 10% in a vocational or trade school, less than 5% in a two-year college, and less than 2% in a four-year college. Furthermore, students with learning disabilities who have dropped out of school may pursue the military only to discover that a high school diploma is now required for application.

According to a study by Zetlin & Hossenini (1989) of six postschool case studies of young adults with mild disabilities, the students "were at a loss to plan for the future, maintained an unrealistic appraisal of their skills, and expressed discontent and frustration with their present situation." Sitlington and Frank (1990) examined the adult adjustment of 911 students with learning disabilities one year following high school graduation. They reported that only 54% of the graduates interviewed met the following criteria: (a) employed or otherwise meaningfully engaged; (b) living independently or with a friend, parent, or relative; (c) paying at least a part of their living expenses; and (d) involved in more than one leisure activity. They also reported that the majority of the graduates were employed in jobs with lower social status. Student with disabilities are often engaged in jobs which are menial, pay low wages, and support a low-praise environment. According to an editor of *Exceptional Parent* (1994), the U.S. Department of Education released a recent report to Congress that found that within three to five years after high school, only 20% of students with disabilities were functioning independently in living arrangements, social relationships, and employment. Another 43% were functioning independently in *at least* two of these categories.

The limited scope with which we have often approached transition reflects career development only with little or not emphasis on independent living outcomes. In an attempt to demonstrate the relevancy of school curriculum to adult living, the educators involved in the Kentucky Transition Project, a project coordinated by the Interdisciplinary Institute at the University of Kentucky and funded by the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS), Student Transition Enhancement Project (STEP) developed the course "Life Management," with a curriculum content that is functional and that carefully blends all domains of adult life: vocational , life skills, social, and academic. The course "Life Management" focuses on those transitional behaviors needed to become a responsible community/family member, citizen, employee, and productive leisurite/avocational participant. Outcomes and goals of this course are based on student and family choices, as well as individual needs and preferences. Students are given opportunities to learn about and/or directly experience an array of community options, and interagency collaboration (specifically transition planning, shared resources, and shared communication and information) is activated. Particular emphasis is placed on self-advocacy and problem-solving skill development. "Life Management" does not replace

conventional academic or vocational education, but rather refocuses it to reflect the specific transitional needs of youth with disabilities.

"Life Management" improves life options for youth with disabilities and their families by providing access to educational transition experiences which promote personal choice, social integration and employability. Inherent in the "Life Management" curriculum are the philosophical underpinnings that students with disabilities can be empowered to make informed decisions about their future, take responsibility for those decisions, and can respond effectively to programs which promote generalization and maintenance of skills that lead to independent living.

The "Life Management" curriculum enhances the students' motivation throughout all four domains (life skills, social, academic, vocational) by employing a combination of teaching strategies and routines that emphasize hands-on activities, small group discussions, and self-discovery projects. Direct instruction, which represents the concepts and skills to be learned, is immediately followed by an activity which involves direct application, the incorporation of community resources, or small group discussion. A culminating performance has been designed for each curriculum area as well as a writing prompt and an open-ended response prompt, which promotes the application of problem-solving skills. All of the activities associated with "Life Management" provide students with ample opportunities to see the connection between the activities within the curriculum and the real world situations they will encounter throughout life. Students are taught to assume a participatory and/or leadership role during their transition planning meeting, enhancing their motivation and commitment to achieve their goals and objectives. When students are taught their rights and responsibilities according to IDEA, Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, coupled with the teaching of self-advocacy skills, they will be empowered to take responsible control of the transition process. The breadth of activities within the curriculum enhance students' motivation to remain in school by increasing self-esteem, creating a positive attitude toward school, and improving the students' level of achievement.

Students participating in the "Life Management" course will be instructed in a six-step management/decision-making model when establishing weekly transition or future goals. When students complete an in-depth self assessment, taking an inventory of their own strengths and weaknesses in determining what they need to learn to be successful, their role as the control agent increases, thereby increasing their likelihood of success. Students will also develop a transition plan for post-graduation (involving interagency collaboration), which may include employment options, post-secondary education options, military options, and vocational training options. Students with learning disabilities who are taught how to evaluate services concerning accommodations available at post-secondary settings will have a high rate of participation in post-secondary education options. When students gather information about schools which offer training in their desired field, are aware of the accommodations they need to be successful, and are aware of the accommodations and special services available in their program of interest, they will consider post-secondary education as a viable option.

Students who receive training in social skills for employment will have a higher rate of job maintenance. Two categories of skills employers value as significant factors in job maintenance are personal management skills (those skills related to the development of attitudes and behaviors required to get, keep, and progress on a job) and teamwork skills (those skills needed to work with others on the job). A survey was conducted by the STEP Transition Facilitators to determine those employability skills most desired by local prospective employers in rural settings. Repeatedly, employers expressed a need for employees who exhibited skills in problem-solving, self-control, communication, accepting positive and negative feedback, listening, and team work, as well as demonstrating a strong sense of work ethics. The "Life Management" curriculum provides direct instruction in all of these areas.

According to the National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities (1993), four of the most fundamental transition skills students can have that will serve them well in a variety of adult situations are the following:

- the ability to assess themselves, including their skills and abilities, and the needs associated with their disability;
- awareness of the accommodations they need because of their disability;
- knowledge of their civil rights to these accommodations through legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; and
- the self-advocacy skills necessary to express their needs in the workplace, in educational institutions, and in community setting.

"Life Management" skillfully blends the basic tenets of transition into four domain areas: daily living, personal/social, occupational exploration and guidance, and community and federal program awareness. Woven throughout all domains in skill development in problem-solving and self-advocacy. "Life Management" includes such features as: academic expectations, learning links, related concepts, high school demonstrators, materials, commercial products, sample teaching/assessment strategies, ideas for incorporating community resources, linkages to other domains, culminating performances, writing prompts, open-ended response prompts, and sample IEP goals and objectives. In addition, each domain is accompanied by an assessment tool, designed to reflect the instructional content within each domain, and is easily administered and can be used for a variety of purposes (i.e., pre and post tests, quizzes, etc.) Accompanying the curriculum is a Transition Rubric and a Transition Plan Worksheet which are used when assessing the student's present level of performance in each area of transition. The worksheet can be used for multiple years and is particularly useful with the Individual Education Plan (IEP) development, as required by IDEA.

Assisting students with disabilities to make a successful transition from educational settings into the work force, adult life and their community is and should be a high national priority. The "Life Management" curriculum has carefully blended career education, strategic

instruction, social skills and self-advocacy training into a unified program. Implementation of this curriculum will maximize our efforts to retain students with mild disabilties in school for as long as possible and equip them with the skills they will need to conduct their lives, both productively and pleasurably, in the communities in which they live.

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